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ABSTRACT

An examination of the role of the principle players in second language learning--teachers, students, and instructional material developers--offers insight into the field of language pedagogy during a period of rapid technological change. All are living in a technologically changing environment but are all affected in different ways. Materials writers are challenged most directly, because they must keep up with the technology or lose credibility, and at the same time they must focus on the effectiveness and current acceptability of the materials they create. The teacher's role, already undergoing major shifts as instruction has come to be viewed as the directing of others' learning, will continue to change as new teachers' behaviors reflect their own training and professional socialization. The teacher as authority figure is disappearing, but all teachers must remain conversant with the communication channels through which language flows. The learner's role is becoming infused with greater activism and responsibility, involving more awareness of learning methods and strategies, traditional and nontraditional. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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THE ROLES OF L2 TEACHERS, LEARNERS, AND MATERIALS DEVELOPERS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Fraida Dubin

INTRODUCING ROLES

The term 'roles' is a familiar one to language teachers. It turns up in many textbooks as an activity which gives learners opportunities for practicing the new language within the contextual framework established in the lesson. Since learning a new language implies some kind of alternation in one's persona, role-playing, as the activity is generally called, appears to be well-suited for second and foreign language classrooms. Role-playing, as it is typically carried out in language classrooms, has roots in two separate areas, the theatre and therapy (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986). In the former, it is utilized as a warm-up activity for actors; in the latter, it becomes a tool for therapists in helping people with emotional and psychological problems.

Roles have other lives as well. They are theoretical constructs which sociologists and social psychologists employ to describe levels of social interaction that lie outside of one's individual personality. Societal organization entails roles for individuals which imply certain kinds of identities, or patterns of behavior expected in given social situations. Roles which people assume through their membership in a particular society are reflected in behavior, modes of conduct, dress, bearing... as well as choice of appropriate register for language use. All of us have multiple roles: as professionals, as family members, as sub-culture members, etc. The British writer H G Wells, in surveying others' expectations of him as a famous author, husband, father, son, etc said "I am not a person; I am a mob."

In language classes, the participants carry out roles which are part of the larger context, school. These roles of 'learner' and 'teacher' have somewhat different manifestations depending on the particular setting: campus, academy, institute, center, etc. But they share underlying similarities. Of course, in school settings there are other roles, as well: for example, administrators, supervisors, inspectors, etc. Their physical presence in classrooms may be infrequent or intermittant, yet the roles they fill have implications for others' behaviours.
Another absentee role, a vital one in language classrooms, is carried out by the materials preparers and the authors of the textbooks which learners and teachers

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use. In fact, these three together, the learner, the teacher, and the materials writer constitute the crucial cast of characters in the area with which we are concerned.

In this paper, I explore the real-life roles of a trio not usually viewed together: learner, teacher, and writer. The background or contextualization for this view is now, our time and place on the earth with its burst of new technological developments, particularly those which affect the processing, spread, and delivery of language -- a phenomenon commonly called the "information explosion." In looking at some of the implications of this outburst, I suggest that the roles of learners, teachers, and writers are inevitably changing and shifting in some kind of symbiotic relationship with new technologies. In order to see change in perspective, it helps to contrast where we have been with where we might be heading. The where-we-have-been-view is discussed under the sub-heading, 'Conventional Roles.' A tempting, so-called solution, is discussed in the second section, 'Personifying Roles.' Finally, some of the consequences of the shifts and changes taking place in classroom roles are presented in the last section, 'Roles In Transition.'

CONVENTIONAL ROLES

In the language pedagogy literature, teachers and learners appear to have been, over periods of time, alternately in focus. So, for example, when a particular method held forth, teachers' concerns were foregrounded. The audio-lingual era, of course, is our classic example. Then, in the early 1970's, learners' concerns came into their own with much greater emphasis given to their needs, differences, varieties, etc. In the mid-seventies, the term 'teach/learn' became common usage as a way to characterize the shared responsibilities these roles entailed (Pitt-Corder). Most recently, revived emphasis has being placed on learners through approaches called 'cooperative' or 'collaborative' learning, at least in the United States. In this view, everything that happens in the classroom is not left to the teacher alone. Learners are not passive receivers, rather they involve themselves in the work of learning in quite dynamic ways.

The fact that our conception of the roles for teachers and learners have been shifting is quite consistent with what social scientists say about roles. Anthropologists call these changes "culture conflicts." No doubt, the way I have characterized traditional teacher/learner roles is still very firmly in place in many places in the world today. "Role conflicts," the sociologists' term (Wolff), is used to describe what seems to take place when roles are affected by the larger societal context and what is taking place when roles are affected by the larger societal context and what is taking place in that sphere. A frequently cited example in discussions of role conflicts by social scientists is the husband and wife relation-

ship and how it is affected by the mores, values, and beliefs of the culture as a whole. There are striking differences, in my culture certainly, in the way husband and wife responsibilities are carried out by people in their twenties and thirties as contrasted with my own age contemporaries. Sociologists call studies which contrast generations in this way "age-grading."

So far, I believe the ground I've been covering is well-developed, familiar territory. But what about the roles of materials preparers? Those phantom people who never appear in classrooms at all except through what anthropologists call 'artifacts,' or textbooks, along with all the other educational materials which they produce. I suggest that their role, at best, wobbles badly both as it is viewed by writers themselves as well as by their audience -- teachers and learners. The fact that it is rarely delineated is a telling indication of its vagueness. Writers' products, those artifacts, receive a minimum amount of attention in treatments of methodology and then it is apt to be in the form of a warning about their use. Writers themselves, of course, are often teachers, but carrying out a different role. Indeed, many of the pitfalls in educational writing come about by the author's unclear view of the writer's role.

This artifact of the language classroom, the textbook, has been undergoing significant changes during the recent period. In fact, unless one has kept up with developments in English language teaching, it is apt not to be recognized in its 1980's style. As manifested in its traditional or "classic" format, it figured prominently in a recent Broadway musical, an acclaimed work for the theater which many of us who live in the United States and elsewhere have viewed on television. In Stephen Sondheim's "Sunday in the Park With George," an English language textbook, used by a young French woman before she embarks with her new husband and infant daughter for America, is a pivotal element in the plot. Almost one hundred years later, the then-infant, now aged-daaughter still clings to her mother's English textbook as a tangible linking force between her mother's generation, her own, and her grandson's. The English sentences in the curious book were composed by an author who worked with the tacit understanding that the writer's role was to provide examples of so-called rules of grammar.

The book is Marie's.
The book is hers.
The tail is the dog's.
The tail is its.

Contemporary language textbooks are written from a quite different point of view, at least those that are produced by writers who are in touch with developments in the various fields of scholarship which contribute to language pedagogy. They strive to present language within a context that provides continuity, mean-

ingfulness and a sense of reality. Moreover, the tasks which are laid out for the learners, the activities, endeavor to engage the users of the book in ways that stimulate the process of learning.

But the writer's role in relationship to learners and teacher is quite murky in the materials in the market today. This ambivilence is particularly apparent in the way in which writers choose to address their audience, teachers and learners. At times, there is a covert attitude of circumventing the teacher. Thus, when the writer addresses the learner the voice typically used is the command mode expressed by verbs such as: "listen to," "compare your answers with," "choose a partner," "study the list," "select the appropriate answer," etc. In other words, the writer speaks directly to the learner and leaves the teacher out of the picture. However, an alternate analysis of this kind of writing might say that by using this voice the writer is actually supplying a script with the expectation that the teacher, in fact, will read the textbook to the learners. There is the assumption that the teacher is a mediator between writers and learners.

Another example of the uncertainty about the writers' role turns up in those books that use the teacher as a messenger or errand-person. For example: "Have your teacher help you find a catalog or mail-order booklet;" or, "Ask your teacher to give you a map of your city, country or state." There are, as well, the books that indicate unsureness about what is the writer's and what is the teacher's actual areas of responsibility: "Discuss the following ideas with your teacher before you write these letters," or "Have your Teacher explain the issues in the article before your group prepares a panel." I suggest that most textbook writers tend to overlook the question of their role relationship to their audience -- learners and teachers -- in fact, they use the "command" mode because it is the accepted usage in this genre, not because they have thought through the consequences of its use.

These anomalies occur, too, because the craft aspect of textbook writing has largely been ignored. The large literature on second language pedagogy contains few entries devoted to the writing of language textbooks, or a view from the writer's rather than the teacher's perspective. While recently the writers' view has come to the foreground, principally at professional meetings, the focus has tended to be on issues of writer/publisher relations, how to get manuscripts published, and similar topics.

A few notable exceptions exist, of course: Beile and Rutherford (1975) were concerned with the ways that writing teams link their work to the needs of teachers. A brief section in Wilkins' influential work (1976) described the potential of the narrative format for developing materials within the notional-functional curriculum he was proposing. Breen and Candlin (1980) advocated that in the framework of a communicative curriculum authentic text-types be utilized and that the text, to provide "verisimilitude", should be used by learners in the way in which it was originally intended. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) contrasted the

differences between materials which are produced within and outside of an institutional framework along with giving general guidelines for writing projects.

When textbooks have been discussed in language pedagogy sources, the focus more often than not, has been on adaptation of existing works or on criteria for evaluating and selecting books. For example, on adaptation the work of Madsen and Bowen (1978) and Stevick (1971); on overall evaluation criteria Robinett (1978), Dubin and Olshtain (1977), and Celce-Murcia and MacIntosh (1979). More specialized criteria for evaluation have also been suggested, for example: culture content (Joiner), sociolinguistic elements (Judd), and foreign language classrooms (Davison).

This emphasis on adaptation and evaluation, or an outsider's view, underscores the point that the role of the writer from a writer's perspective has been generally overlooked. In fact, the conventional point-of-view assumes that most materials are inadequate for the task, even flawed, and that the teacher needs to be warned about using them. For example:

> "The higher the general standard of the teachers, the less important are the course-books and other teaching materials. But when the standard of teachers is low, as it inevitably is for a time in conditions of rapid expansion of education, then the standard of teaching materials assumes great importance...insufficiently trained teachers working with poor materials face a considerable handicap."
>
> (Stevens)

> "The teacher/educator should not depend on materials alone to create a learning atmosphere in the classroom...materials should act only as a supplement to what the teacher provides."
>
> (Allwright)

Thus, we find that the "experts" or "specialists," for the most part, promote the value of, the concerns of, the needs of teachers, or learners, in some cases both. Few, if any of the experts in the fields are advocates of materials writers' concerns by offering professional help, guidelines for improving the craft through workshops, let alone university courses in the components of educational writing. While the roles of learners and teachers are relatively well-defined, and as suggested above, changing in quite dynamic ways, the role of the writer is, at best, left to the individual author to create for him/herself with each new project that is undertaken.

PERSONIFYING THE ROLES OF LEARNERS, TEACHER, WRITER

At this point, there is a temptation to personify these roles by viewing the situation as one which qualifies for intervention by a behavioral specialist, or a professional who brings the parties in for a group therapy session. The protagonists seem to be ready-made: learners, a bit unsure of themselves, but manifesting embarrassment, boredom and irritation for ever having been dragged into the therapist's office in the first place; teachers, secretly knowing that their new friend, the textbook author, is providing more fulfillment than the specialist in the field ever did, but too unsure to speak up about their own feelings; writers, hesitant and shy in the presence of their audience about whom, up to now, they have only been able to phantasize.

I will indulge in the possibilities inherent in this script for a paragraph or so, then cut it off because I find that it diminishes significant elements which are affecting the roles of teachers, learners and all others who work in school settings, namely cognizance of what is happening in the larger world, the technological one. First, and quickly, back to the therapist's office:

One approach the concerned, objective (paid) listener might take is to counsel the teacher about not feeling obliged to heed the well-intentioned advise of experts. "Instead, listen to your own inner-voice. Do what you consider best for your students. If you're getting something of value from the published course materials, keep on using them. Don't worry about creating a good classroom atmosphere. It will come about naturally. You must believe more in yourself."

It is intriguing to continue to spin out other possible so-called solutions in an effort to help bring about more cooperation, harmony, and understanding among the principle players in this drama of the classroom. To do so, however, would overlook the fact that while all of those concerned with despensing instruction -- teachers, writers, and experts -- have been busy talking to each other, in the meantime, the learners have been busy attending to other things, often outside of school.

They have been watching a great deal of TV, from infancy. They are caught up with the world of popular culture, cassette tapes, movies, video cassettes; they're comfortable with every kind of computer game; they find perfectly normal all of the varied manifestations which combinations of video, computers, the entire microchip technology can provide: automated money tellers at banks, computer scanners in super markets. Even of they cannot afford to buy them, they know a great deal about high-priced products such as compact discs.

The language teacher is caught between the experts who disparage materials and the learners' media-focused world. How can the teacher compete with videogames, VHS cassettes, and all the other products of growing technology? Technology, in fact, is a potent change-agent which provides the background for

important realignments in the roles people assume in their school-related lives. Learners are learning more from each other, a pattern interestingly enough tied to the ways in which they are socialized into the culture of technological toys. Parents usually do not instruct their children in these devices, peers do. Look closely; you'll see that the materials writer has become a computer programmer.

ROLES IN TRANSITION

The observations in this section are not those of a professional futurist, although it is enticing to pause for a moment and consider how technology has brought about a revolution in human perception through a vast new apparatus for disseminating meaning, or language (Smith). But what of our principle players, learners, teachers, and materials writers? All three are living in the same technologically changing environment, although each group is affected in somewhat different ways in terms of their role designations.

Materials writers are challenged most directly. For them it is a matter of change, join up, or drop out. The necessity is already here in word processing as well as in the production of books through computerized typesetting. Writers today must know their way around these developments or risk not being taken seriously by their colleagues. At the same time, the possibility for the writers' role to become more prominent in language pedagogy is motivated by video and computer assisted instruction. Writers, however, must be aware of pitfalls: for example, writing computer programs which reproduce the teacher-as-authority role in the guise of the program. If you have followed the reviews of many CALL programs on the market, you will recognize this tendency in critical comments such as "too mechanical," or "there is not enough opportunity for the learners' creativity to be activated."

The teachers' role, already undergoing major shifts as instruction has come to be viewed as directing others' learning, will continue to change as a result of new teachers manifesting the ways in which they themselves were socialized into prevailing classroom roles. Along the way, there are apt to be any number of skirmishers, upheavels, minor tragedies, and inevitable backlashes. But overall, the teacher as an authority figure is fading fast. At the same time, in order for teachers to appear creditable in the eyes of learners, they too will need to be conversant with all the channels, worldwide, through which language flows.

The learners' role is becoming infused with a greater sense of activism, an inevitable outcome when people assume more responsibility for their own learning. Successful language learning, possibly more than other subject areas, involves knowing how to learn in ways that suit one's own particular needs. Young learners will increasingly realize that their technological toys, walkman recorders

to lap computers, afford access to learning new languages in ways that are more dynamic and in tune with their personal styles than what is offered in traditional classroom settings.

I have found it useful to draw on the concept of roles as a mechanism for characterizing the field of language pedagogy the in light of today's and tomorrow's technological explosion, or revolution in the dissemination of meaning. I offer a final remark as a comment of the last item on Professor Candlin's list of "research findings" (1988), namely that "context improves learning." I would extend the definition of context in that item by making the following prediction: Second language is likely to grow and thrive in the coming period because of the context of an expanding global technology; moreover, this occurrence will take place despite what either teachers or materials writers do in classrooms, or what the experts advise them to do. Rather, language learning will flourish because of the wider context of technology in the lives of young learners.

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